

# Women in Transition

The history of women in the Ibo society of Nigeria contains two conflicting images. One is of the vibrant, fearless precolonial woman who knew herself and her worth and often claimed equality with men in the community; the other is of the subordinate, confined, but still active, modern woman struggling to define herself in an ever-changing world. Both oral and written accounts by natives as well as nonnatives who visited precolonial Ibo society describe Ibo women as strong, independent-minded people who took full part in the economic, religious, and political lives of their communities. "They have intense vigor and vitality for life," writes Sylvia Leith-Ross, one of the earliest visitors to Iboland. "The women are hard-headed and move fearlessly through the complexities of life."<sup>1</sup> Lord Frederick Lugard, one of Britain's colonial administrators in Nigeria, describes precolonial Ibo women as "ambitious, courageous, self-reliant, hard-working, and independent. [They] claim full equality with the opposite sex, and would seem indeed to be the dominant partner."<sup>2</sup>

## The Effects of Colonization

But the lives of Ibo women changed irrevocably when the British invaded and settled Iboland from the beginning of the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. "Iboland underwent fundamental transformations in all

areas of life under the British control," states Ibo historian Felix K. Ekechi. "Colonization changed the democratic nature of the economic, religious, social, and political institutions in Iboland. It enforced policies that diminished the roles and status of Ibo women, making them second class citizens."<sup>3</sup> Contemporary Ibo women simply describe their lives as "lives in transition," existing somewhere at the crossroads between traditional and newly acquired values. As such, their lives are defined by conflict, confusion, and struggle, as they attempt to find for themselves a comfortable place in society.

## Second-Class Citizens

It is true that in comparison to the lives of women in the other major ethnic groups in Nigeria (the Yorubas and the Hausas), modern Ibo women enjoy considerable freedom of thought and of action. For example, Ibo women have always had the right to vote. Both boys and girls have equal access to elementary and secondary education. And almost every girl whose parents can afford it is encouraged to study beyond the high school level.

But freedom to work and vote and access to education do not mean women are equal to men. Jack Harris, an anthropologist, reports that during his field research in Iboland he was repeatedly told by Ibo men "that women are subsidiary to men, that they are practically chattels [slaves], and have no

## I Could Have Been a Math Teacher!

*In an interview with the author, Uchenna Adigha, a twenty-nine-year-old Ibo woman who teaches at a high school in Iboland, tells the story of how she became a literature rather than math or science teacher:*

"In secondary school I was good in math and very good in the sciences. But somehow, I got the message that I was not

supposed to be good in these subjects. Women and girls are supposed to excel in literature and language arts, not in math or the sciences. So I convinced myself that I did not have to be good in math and the sciences. I focused my studies on literature and language. And that's how I became a literature teacher instead of a math or biology teacher. Or perhaps a scientist."

power other than that allowed them by men."<sup>4</sup> Harris reported his research in 1940, but his findings for the most part hold true, as contemporary Ibo women are denied access to political leadership positions. Currently, they hold less than 1 percent of political offices in Iboland. Even though women have access to higher education, they are proportionally segregated based on gender in terms of what subjects they study, as opposed to men. Women are somehow pressured into studying and training for the so-called women occupations, such as nursing, secretarial work, and primary school teaching. "Far fewer women train for the professions," says Carolynne Dennis, a schoolteacher who has taught in Nigeria for seventeen years. "University statistics show that many women choose to study language arts while men focus on engineering and other science or mathematical science courses."<sup>5</sup>

## Economic Restrictions, Financial Hardships

The story is the same in the economic arena. Though Ibo women are expected to work outside the home and contribute financially



*Modern Ibo women have less freedom than their precolonial counterparts, who enjoyed political power and proclaimed their equality with men.*

to the well-being of the family, they are denied access to many economic opportunities. More and more women find themselves economically marginalized and unable to meet their financial domestic duties. Grants for agriculture still go to men—the government chooses to fund large cash crop farmers and ignore the women who mainly grow food crops. Also, an Ibo woman cannot buy or sell land or property without a male representative. “To buy land,” states Harris, “a woman needs a male proxy [representative], either her husband or a close male relative.

This man retains the title to the land, even though in practice the land is owned by the woman.”<sup>6</sup>

Many Ibo women find these restrictions and conflicts annoying and unfair. Some women’s organizations are currently working to reinstate what they call “women’s positions of lost authority.” They believe that reclaiming the past and reinstating traditional rituals and customs, which gave power and status to women in society, will restore balance and bring stability and fulfillment to the lives of present-day Ibo women.

## From Life Among the Ibo Women of Nigeria by Salome C. Nnoromele